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ABSTRACT

Reflections on the fundamental problems of teaching political science in community colleges are outlined. Facing the stark reality of a student population deficient in reading and writing skills, the teacher must make difficult concepts and material comprehensible in order to create a sense of attachment for the nation, its Constitution, laws, and institutions. The necessity for thoughtfulness about political things must overcome the constant repetition of slogans and simplistic rhetoric which is common among the under-educated community college student. The author has found the lecture-discussion technique supplemented by student dialogue debates on controversial political issues to be an effective means of imparting information in an American government course. In more difficult political theory courses, it is often necessary to greatly simplify the concepts of the political theorists being considered. To create a greater sense of public responsibility in our public servants, public administration courses in the community college must become less removed and more relevant to the things public servants actually do. For example, since police officers often encounter situations involving Constitutional rights, a relevant community college course should involve a study of the development of Constitutional law. Not only would courses of this nature prepare students to be better citizens, but they would also instill public responsibility in our public servants. (Author/DE)

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POLITICAL SCIENCE AND EDUCATION FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE: A VIEW FROM THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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POLITICAL SCIENCE AND EDUCATION FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE: A VIEW FROM THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

I Introduction

The following represents some reflections on political science teaching in the community college, accumulated during eight years at an urban, public two-year college in Chicago. There is a fundamental problem about this kind of teaching, namely the problem of mass education in a democracy. What should the many be taught? Is it possible to achieve a degree of enlightenment that would be salutary for citizenship? And what about mass higher education? It becomes clearer every day to those who teach that this may be a contradiction in terms; what is mass cannot be higher.

Today, public service programs abound in two-year colleges. The federal government, states and localities have determined that public employees would benefit from college courses, programs, degrees. At the lower echelons of the bureaucracy where non-degreed personnel are likely to be employed, the belief is that individuals would gain from acquiring basic skills, technical knowledge and some liberal education.

Is political science an essential ingredient of curricula for government employees? The answer to the question is likely to effect the profession of political science as many current graduate students will be forced to seek employment and may well find themselves in teaching careers in community colleges, perhaps teaching courses for public servants: police officers, corrections officers, clerks, technicians, and workers in occupations that have yet to be dreamed up. What has political science to offer this segment of the populace? What principles of political education do we wish to put across, what courses should we offer and what should they contain? What we teach people at this level of government service effects the larger society; first, as we educate citizens generally, even fairly ignorant ones who may well remain fairly ignorant; then, as we teach them things that may enable them to perform their jobs better. Though it is unlikely that leaders will emerge from these schools, neither is it impossible. This is not, for the most part, the concern of the two-year college.

II Education for Citizenship

The first question has to do with educating men and women towards a higher level of citizenship. The classic idea that the citizen of a democracy must possess virtue and wisdom has come to mean in modern times that he must at least be literate. It is in the community college

that one faces the stark reality of deficient literacy; the more essential problem of liberal education is hardly reached. It is not a question of how to give these students a classic liberal education; rather it is how to make them literate so they can read some basic works and learn some things they may require to work better.

At Loop College, one of seven Chicago two-year colleges committed to an "open door" policy for entrance, most of the students require special remedial assistance in "basic skills," that is, reading and writing. This is a serious problem that is now touching all college teachers, even those at elite schools, a problem that has hardly been addressed by educators. For the great number of Chicago high school graduates, their 12-year tenure in the public schools has left them shamefully ill-equipped to read good books, to understand and articulate good ideas, to write, spell, and punctuate words and sentences that express ideas. Most of these students are severely handicapped and most of their teachers are equally handicapped in overcoming those shortcomings. My own approach is to try to do the best with the deplorable, for all other current approaches involve simplification and simple-minded innovation at the level of kindergarten pedagogy.

The first courses in political science, American government and the introduction to political science through political theory, when taught at the junior college level are adapted to suit the abilities of the greater number of students. Reading lists are most likely shorter, term papers may be waived, expectations certainly lower. A reference to a historical event or figure or to a literary work, once considered part of the common culture, falls flat; they never heard of it. But students can know about their nation's government. What ability they have can be put to use in giving them knowledge about the constitution of government, the fundamental ideals and principles of the American republic, the structure ofgovernment, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and a consideration of serious questions that have persisted in the American experience: majority tyranny, federalism, separation of powers, slavery, civil disobedience.

If this citizenry cannot be "informed" in the ideal sense, it can have a familiarity with and attachment to the Constitution, laws and history of this nation. The teacher's part here is crucial; he must not only make the material available and comprehensible, he must impart through his own attitudes and feelings the deep respect for the nation, its ideals and institutions, even a reverence for them, as Lincoln would have it (see Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838). This is not easy to do, considering the effect of mass culture in conditioning a reflexive low-level cynicism about, distrust for, and separation from everything political. The junior college teacher is daily, painfully made aware of the pernicious effect of these teachings on under-educated students. Blacks especially have been exposed to the most deadening

undermining of the possibility for thoughtfulness about political things through constant repetition of slogans and simplistic rhetoric. This must be cut through if learning is to begin. Difficult, yes, but not impossible.

I have found several techniques or tools useful in the American government course: first, the textbook, which provides the basic necessary information about government that these students especially lack and require; second, the lecture-discussion method which imparts information and ideas but also permits questions to be asked and answered, alternatives to be considered, the beginnings of intelligent argument; third, a few selected readings which fill in, explain, lend color to the bare facts (some Federalist papers, selections from deTocqueville, Jefferson, Lincoln, articles on the Presidency, Congress, some Supreme Court cases). Finally, I have been experimenting with a debate or dialogue method of student reports or presentations in which two students argue a question like judicial review, the limits on the President's war-making power, the Supreme Court's expansion of the rights of accused persons. The last question provides some of the more interesting discussions with police officers. The debate method requires that the student present information and, further, answer opposing arguments. He may have to formulate arguments to which he is basically opposed, which makes for learning. These are some of the means of giving two-year students some understanding of, respect for and perhaps even an attachment to their nation, the attachment the founders of the republic hoped would evolve (see Federalist 17) but which has so sadly been precluded by developments in American society since its founding.

The other course which constitutes an introduction to political science theory is more problematic, in that it involves reading theoretical works: Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Marx, works difficult for the best students to comprehend and appreciate. There is a greater burden on the instructor to explain and simplify, but I have found that students can comprehend The Republic at a certain level and even John Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government, if carefully explained. These great works have many levels of meaning and may be understood by such students. From time to time, I must admit, I do question the desirability of teaching a difficult reading, explaining it at great length, perhaps simplifying it to the point of absurdity. But a few students will comprehend it; is it not worth doing for them? My own feeling is that political theory should not be the first course in political science; that should be American government. Yet better students may get a great deal from this course and it is indispensible for future majors.

III Education for Public Service

The public sector of employment in America is growing faster than any other, creating an ever-increasing number of lower echelon bureaucrats.

The classic distinction between the bureaucrat and the civil servant rests on the liberal education of the civil servant. If there is a crisis of liberal education in America, it can hardly be expected that middle and upper echelon public employees will be educated as civil servants in this sense; for the lower sector of the bureaucracy it is an impossibility. It is not impossible for them, however, to possess a public-spiritedness, a sense of responsibility to the nation, state, or city that employs them, and to the citizens they serve.

Political science can serve to elevate the quality of citizenship in the manner already discussed: by creating a sense of attachment to the nation, its Constitution, laws and institutions. It can do this for public servants, for whom that attachment must be a pre-requisite, it can create a public-spiritedness in them, and it can also provide them with specific knowledge that can be used in performing their jobs. American government ought to be a requirement for students enrolled in public service programs. I have found that this is not generally the case; public administration is more frequently required. This latter course presents a problem for community college teaching; when it is taught in the traditional manner, a "straight" public administration course, it is far too abstract and removed from anything these people actually do. I teach this course to police officers, for example, and find it not very pertinent, even though it raises some interesting questions for them.

For other types of personnel, the study of management, organization, budgeting and personnel can be useful. It is important to relate the abstract theory of the standard public administration course to real situations that individuals may face; the case study method accomplishes this aim. Students may use their own experiences and abstract from them; for example, how was a problem of inter-office conflict settled? What principles of administration were involved? The classic case study approach to the study of administration (see Harold Stein, Public Administration and Policy Development) may be used as a model for students to create their own case studies. The problem is generalized, a theory may be developed about it, it can be examined from outside its context and perhaps solved according to some general rule. This approach can elevate the level of problem solving and the caliber of work done.

Police officers, whom many of us at community colleges teach in large numbers, are a special category of public servan and thus present a special problem for political science teaching. Their work is for the most part active, physical work. They use physical coercion to enforce the laws; they wear arms, even in the classroom. Sometimes, not as frequently as Police Story would have it, they confront life or death situations; more frequently they are answering calls for assistance, settling disputes, or performing a routine task. The question has been raised as to whether or not college education is desirable for the police officer, whether in fact he might not actually be impeded by deliberative thought consequent to higher education. (see James Q. Wilson, Varieties of Police Behavior. Wilson describes how police training fails for the most part to equip patrolmen to carry out their most common functions.)

Constitutional law addresses political questions in a manner well suited to the police experience. Many serious situations encountered by law enforcement officers entail legal interpretation and may also involve questions of civil rights protected by the Constitution. Police officers are required to carry a copy of the right of citizens arising out of Miranda v. Arizona (384 U.S. 436, 1966). More often than most other public employees they may seriously effect individual freedom: by stopping, questioning, frisking, searching, arresting, or detaining individuals. Knowing the Constitution and being familiar with the way courts have interpreted governmental power, its limitations, and the rights of citizens can provide an understanding of the rationalization for protecting the liberties of citizens while performing police functions. Constitutional law is thus a good way of examining political issues pertinent to police work. The overall effect of higher education and political science education in particular is thus salutary for police officers; it serves to elevate them as citizens and as responsible servants of the public.

IV Conclusion

The foregoing reflections on community college teaching are meant to stimulate consideration of some fundamental problems that confront political science teachers at these institutions. What is it we wish to leave with these students? How can we accomplish what we set out to do, given the severe intellectual limitation of students and very often of the "educators" who make policy for them? Generally, the most adverse conditions for teaching exist here; these must somehow be overcome if we would reach our goal: forming better citizens, developing a greater sense of public responsibility in our public servants.

I would not want to conclude these remarks without taking notice of the few, very few, capable men and women who pass through these schools. For them, there is a special responsibility for the teacher, to inform, guide, inspire. Perhaps the best that can be achieved by the community college teacher is to reach the few who may understand, "that those who have ears may hear."

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